SCHOOLS

Schools are the most important focal point for dropout prevention. The research on dropout prevention, effective schools, and restructuring schools, and the Hispanic Dropout Project's commissioned papers—all conclude that schools do, in fact, matter in students' lives. In the course of our explorations, we found powerful and personalized evidence that schools matter *positively* in keeping Hispanic students in school and in helping them to achieve academically. The most impressive schools that we visited were those where teachers and staff worked together to personalize each student's school experience. Teachers collaborated to ensure that no Hispanic student fell through the cracks, either academically or psychosocially. Spanish-speaking staff were respected for their ability to communicate with students' parents; indeed, many of these schools aggressively recruited multilingual, multiethnic staff who could relate to their students and parents.

> *"The key finding from our research is that effective schools provide at-risk students with a community of support. School as a community of support is a broad concept in which school membership and educational engagement are central. School membership is concerned with a sense of belonging and social bonding to the school and its members. Educational engagement is defined as involvement in school activities but especially traditional classroom and academic work. . . . Schools successful at dropout prevention created a supportive environment that helped students overcome impediments to membership and engagement."*
> In Wehlage, G. G., Rutter, R. A., Smith, G. A., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R. R. (1989). *Reducing the risk: Schools as communities of support* (p. 223). London: The Falmer Press.

The Hispanic Dropout Project saw secondary schools and an entire school system in which Hispanic students graduated in greater numbers than in similar schools; these examples challenge the myth that secondary schools are doomed to be cold and impersonal places for students or that they are too difficult to change into personalized and caring places. We also visited elementary and middle schools that made special efforts to ensure that all their children learned how to read, achieved academically, and became better connected to their school. Recognizing the real-world challenges that their students faced, principals, teachers, and other school staff spoke with determination about Hispanic students learning, about not losing students, and about always trying to do better. Teachers at one elementary school, for instance, said that they were relentless in ensuring that all of their Hispanic students—even students who did not speak English—could read by third grade.

Moreover, out-of-school alternative programs for students who could not attend regular school used the latter as reference points by providing a curriculum that mirrored what was offered in regular schools, by tutoring and helping students with their homework, and by helping to return students to their original schools. Their services, therefore, were linked to the school and its education programs.

"Latinos at these schools "know the deal." They know when they are getting a good education and when they are not. They also have some pretty good ideas on how to improve education. . . . The bottom line in this report is that: good neighborhoods or bad: good schools = success, bad schools cause dropouts."
In Rodriguez, C. E. (1992). *Student voices: High school students' perspectives on the Latino dropout problem* (p. 99). (Report to the Latino Commission on Educational Reform). New York: Fordham University.

On the negative side, the research literature paints an unflattering portrait of schools that do nothing to improve their dropout rates, that use some subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) means to encourage Hispanic students to leave school, and that deny Hispanics educational opportunity. The staff at such schools behave as if the students (and their parents) are so rife with social problems that there is nothing that they can do. The Hispanic Dropout Project heard some school and district staff claim that schools could do very little to reduce the Hispanic dropout rate because of student poverty, lack of student readiness or desire to learn, language, excessive student mobility, excessive costs, lack of qualified staff, lack of knowledge about the real causes of the problem, lack of parental concern, parental aspirations that do not include school, and earlier efforts that have failed. Schools, according to these individuals, can do very little about the larger social ills that befall their students. The literature is clear: Schools where such beliefs are the norm are not likely to be very successful either in ensuring that large numbers of their Hispanic students graduate or in educating many of their students very well.

The Hispanic Dropout Project heard from students, parents, and community activists who said that school conditions made dropping out an inevitable outcome and logical choice for students. In these schools, staff were said not to care about Hispanic students; policies involving discipline and grading were applied in a biased manner; tracking and other forms of ability grouping were used to write off whole segments of the student body, not to improve educational opportunities; and the general attitude seemed to be: "Ignore the problem and it will go away." Schools may in fact *try* to make the problem go away. For instance, we heard about schools using Hispanic students' excessive absences to suspend students rather than to conduct formal suspension hearings on more serious charges. Many Hispanic students and parents charged that rules were being enforced unfairly.

"I was absent 27 times in one class, 36 in another. They only checked things out when I was dragged into the principal's office with red eyes. 'Look at these absences.' [they said]. Well, it's about time you noticed!" Testimony at HDP open hearing, Las Cruces

Overcrowding and the quality of a school's facilities affect a school's ability to keep its students. One mother complained that the building code had been waived for the city's schools. This meant that dilapidated schools—located primarily in the inner city—would not have to be brought up to code. According to this mother, the district's newer schools, which were being built in its wealthier neighborhoods would, of course, be built according to code. Another parent noted that her son was one of over 2,000 students in a building designed for 1,500. She talked

about the heat, noise, and deteriorating conditions at this school where large males could not help but jostle one another as they went from class to class. Because of the heat and noise, tempers would flare, fights break out, and students would be suspended. As this mother observed, the step from suspension to dropping out is very small. The Hispanic Dropout Project heard about secondary schools enrolling 40 students in a class, but having 30 chairs. In at least one case, teachers were told not to worry because not all the students would show up. "What sort of a message does this send to the school's students?" asked a graduate from such a school.

"We need smaller classes. With 34 students in a class, teachers don't have time to listen to you. During my freshman and sophomore years, my math classes were small. During my junior year, I was put into large classes. Things got harder for me to learn and the teacher couldn't help me. I was an honors student; remedial classes are even bigger. My sister was in a class with 40 kids. There are 4 to 5 kids for a microscope. We don't have enough books, so they tell us, 'Go to the library [to get books].' We don't have enough chairs in our classrooms, so we have to sit on the floor. We can't even Xerox a poem by Shakespeare. This sends a strong message to the student: 'You're not important'" Testimony at student leader meeting, New York City

There are too many wrongheaded solutions to the issues of low student achievement, retention, excessive student absence, and eventually, student dropout. Tracking, grade retention, and remedial coursework are too often used to write off students considered too difficult to handle. Too many schools focus their efforts on students' acquiring English to the detriment of their learning content. Schools seldom help Hispanic students develop a sense of their own future or provide them with information needed to make informed decisions about their education programs.

The Hispanic Dropout Project found five characteristics of schools that make a difference in their students' education. *First*, these schools have very high academic and behavioral standards for their students. *Second*, they communicate those standards clearly, and they provide access to and support students in meeting those standards—that is, they provide students with many opportunities to succeed in meeting these high standards. *Third*, schools that make a difference connect their students in meaningful ways to adults. In spite of their size, secondary schools can adopt strategies—such as a school within a school, a group of teachers accepting responsibility for the same students, everyone on staff agreeing to "adopt" some students, older students mentoring younger students—to increase the personalization that students need to experience. *Fourth*, these schools connect their students to possible futures in college and the work force. *Fifth*, they provide families with useful information about how their children are doing and about their futures. Rather than accepting the myth that parents do not care, good schools adopt the position that parents need information in order to make informed decisions that affect their children. Aspirations are not enough. For schools to make a difference, they must provide ways for students and their families to achieve those aspirations.

"Educational engagement is a complex process that involves more than simply 'motivating' students. Promoting engagement requires attention to student char-

acteristics, the tasks students are asked to perform, the school environment in which work takes place, and the external environment that influences the student and the school itself. . . .In spite of conditions outside the school that weaken student engagement, there are practices that educators could implement to substantially strengthen it. The level of engagement. . .could be increased if specific impediments under the control of educators were addressed. . . . (1) Schoolwork is not extrinsically motivating for many students because achievement is not tied to any explicit and valued goal; (2) The dominant learning process pursued in schools is too narrow in that it is highly abstract, verbal, sedentary, individualistic, competitive and controlled by others as opposed to concrete, problem-oriented, active, kinesthetic, cooperative and autonomous. Because of these qualities, the dominant mode of learning stifles the likelihood of intrinsic rewards for many students. (3) Classroom learning is often stultifying because educators are obsessed with the 'coverage' of subject matter; this makes school knowledge superficial, and also intrinsically unsatisfying, thereby preventing students from gaining the sense of competence that ideally accompanies achievement." In Wehlage, G. G., Rutter, R. A., Smith, G. A., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R. R. (1989). *Reducing the risk: Schools as communities of support* (p. 179). London: The Falmer Press.

Although we were impressed with the preschool and early childhood education programs that we visited, we would caution that, by themselves, these programs are not enough. First, Hispanic access to high-quality early childhood education programs is limited. According to Head Start data, there simply are not enough programs to meet demand. Second, the research has failed to produce substantial evidence that the effects of early childhood interventions persist very long after the program ends. Schools need to provide consistent and ongoing support throughout grades K–12.

We were impressed with the quality of the alternative programs that we visited; however, we caution that alternative programs can become little more than holding pens for their students and that these programs cannot replace schools. Schools could learn from the quality programs that we visited. Students recounted that they were treated with respect and warmth in their alternative settings. Just as important, staff at such places accepted their students' experiences yet encouraged students to consider the *consequences* of their actions. To the staff, that a student had skipped school a lot, been suspended from school, or had dropped out did not mean that the student was fundamentally flawed. Rather, that a student had behaved inappropriately meant that there were consequences. Personnel in alternative settings helped students learn from their actions, and overcome, avert, or reverse the worst of those consequences. The challenge is for Hispanic students' regular schools to become more like these alternative placements and other schools that do a good job at retaining and educating their students.

Actions the Schools Need to Take
[To Keep Latino Students In]

1. Focus on student learning
2. Meet basic needs
3. Use a variety of teaching techniques
4. Make material meaningful to students
5. Make scholastic standards clear to all
6. Allow no student to fail
7. Use tests as milestones
8. Make participation in school work more rewarding than skipping
9. Make skipping difficult
10. Value persistence and hard work
11. Make schools accessible to parents
12. Assume responsibility for educating all students
13. Mobilize resources to link school and work.

In Romo, H. D., & Falbo, T. (1996). *Latino high school graduation: Defying the odds* (pp. 15-19). Austin: University of Texas Press.

The most shocking of our findings is the rarity of outstanding schools and programs like those we visited. Although the project visited many sites that featured impressive programs, those programs served a very small number of Hispanic students, and they are at variance with the average educational experiences of Hispanic students. However, there was little about those schools and programs that could not be replicated elsewhere.

*1. **Schools should emphasize the prevention of problems. They need to become more aggressive in responding to the early warning signs that a student may be doing poorly in, losing interest in, or in some other way, becoming disengaged from school.***

Elementary schools should ensure that all children know how to read by third grade and that they are learning mathematics with understanding. Middle and secondary schools should build on the successes of elementary schools.

Schools should be alert to early warning signs of student disengagement. If, for example, a student has two unexcused absences in a row from school, parents should be contacted by a live person—by phone or even by a home visit. The immediacy and personalization of the contact make a difference.

1. Schools should be held accountable and should hold themselves accountable for growth and progress of all students.

2. School procedures, practices, and policies must be individualized and personalized for high-risk youth.

3. Effective middle-school interventions for high-risk youth must address simultaneously the three contexts of family, school, and community through an independent, school-based, case management approach.

4. System reforms of schools must not only change organization structures and practices, but more importantly, must change adult attitudes and behaviors to be more compassionate and nurturing toward high-risk youth.

In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). *ALAS. Achievement for Latinos through academic success* (Dropout prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), pp. A69-A70.

Minorities are overrepresented in special education programs. Schools should ensure that their assignment practices are valid; more importantly, they should emphasize the interventions that prevent such placements.

2. ***Schools, especially high schools, need to personalize programs and services that work with Hispanic students.***

Strategies that could be adopted by a high school trying to personalize its programs and services include the reduction of individual class size, reduction in the number of different classes that teachers must teach, creation of schools within schools or of a smaller high school for all but a few highly specialized classes, the creation of houses or academies within a large high school, team-teaching involving fewer students, teachers serving as counselors for or "adopting" a few students, and older students serving as mentors for younger students.

3. ***Schools should be restructured to ensure that all students have access to high-quality curricula. They should reconfigure time, space, and staffing patterns to provide students with additional support needed to achieve.***

School restructuring needs to attend to the nature of the curriculum that is provided to students so that all students encounter a curriculum that is demanding, interesting, and engaging.

"A positive school climate—one in which students feel 'membership' in their schools and in which they perceive that teachers care about them as individuals—

is considered a prerequisite for student engagement in either academic or vocational learning. The large size of many high schools is seen as a strong institutional barrier to a positive school climate. In large schools, teachers are most likely to form close supervisory relations with only the most accomplished students, while others (most often minority students and low achievers) remain isolated from ongoing adult attention. . . . Available evidence indicates that low-achieving students are most likely to prosper in smaller schools. Accordingly, some districts have created alternative schools and schools-within-schools to make schools feel smaller." In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (p. 207). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Secondary and junior high schools should eliminate their lowest tracks. Relative to advanced placement tracks, low-track classrooms are overcrowded, have the least qualified teachers, have the fewest resources, and experience a low-level curriculum focused on remediation to the virtual exclusion of any new or interesting content. If tracking is to be anything for large numbers of Hispanic students other than the final stop en route to being pushed out, these conditions must change.

Hispanic students should be recruited actively into the highest tracks and provided with the support to succeed. In addition to placing students in more demanding curricular settings, schools should provide added support for students such as libraries, after-school programs, individualized tutoring, counseling, and social service referrals.

"Those programs that are most effective are the ones that are least like school. They meet the needs of the learner according to when the learner needs to learn. They provide flexibility. High schools need to become more like this." Testimony at HDP open forum, San Antonio

The changes that we recommend above are not difficult nor are they expensive. What they require is a commitment by school personnel to provide educational opportunities to all their students.

4. Schools should replicate programs that have proven effective. In addition to using new funding, schools should redeploy existing resources to run these programs.

The Hispanic Dropout Project found programs and efforts that have proven effective or show promise for improving Hispanic student achievement and lowering the dropout rate. Schools do not have to reinvent these programs. They should be prepared to adapt existing programs to the needs of their students and to local conditions. Appendix F provides a list of programs identified as effective in the project's commissioned papers.

Effective Dropout Prevention Strategies

Counseling services and adult advocacy for students are key elements of any particular dropout prevention initiative.

At the elementary level, providing after-school tutoring and enrichment that are directly related to in-class assignments and having in-class adult friends (e.g., trained volunteers or helpers) appear to be effective approaches.

At the middle level, team teaching strategies, flexible scheduling, heterogeneous grouping of students, and provision of as-needed counseling assistance are especially useful strategies.

At the secondary level, paid work, embedded in activities that prepare and monitor students' on-the-job experiences, appears to be a critical component to keeping students in school.

In programs where dropout recovery is an emphasis, flexible class schedules assist students who need to work or meet personal commitments during regular school hours.

In Rossi, R. J. (1995). *Evaluation of projects funded by the school dropout demonstration assistance program: Final evaluation report* (Volume 1: Findings and recommendations) (p. 7). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Although any program has start-up costs and schools are strapped for resources, many programs visited by the project and reviewed in its commissioned papers can be implemented through a combination of new and old funding, and a reconfiguration of existing roles and responsibilities.

5. *Schools should carefully monitor the effectiveness of their programs and continuously try to improve them or to replace them with more reliable strategies.*

School effectiveness in reducing Hispanic dropout rates or in increasing student achievement will not be accomplished overnight. The most impressive programs visited by the project had been developed and improved over the years by their staffs. Over the years, these schools and programs had carefully recruited staffs who supported their mission and respected their students; they fine-tuned their strategies for teaching students and for preventing dropout; they recruited parents into partnerships; they developed credibility and support within the Hispanic and business communities; they were entrepreneurial in raising funds to support their efforts.

In talking with members of the Hispanic Dropout Project, school personnel and concerned community people highlighted many well-meaning efforts. Yet they were unable to provide convincing, research-based evidence that their programs were reaching targeted students or that the programs were effective. Schools and others should monitor their efforts, keep what works well, modify what could be improved, and discard what does not work.

"Our recommendations for restructuring schools have called for greater coordination of educational resources and their delivery to students. Restructuring schools must lead to improved management of the educational experiences of students, whether at the classroom, school, district, state, or federal level. Restructuring the relationships among schools, families, and communities must result in the same type of improved management of the educational and social resources delivered to disadvantaged youth. At a time when the gap between available resources and needs is growing, we must obtain as much leverage as possible from all of the resources at our command. The coherent, mutually reinforcing mobilization of school, family, and community resources may be our best hope for addressing the problems of disadvantaged students. We simply cannot afford duplication, lack of coordination, and piecemeal approaches if we wish to have an impact on the problem." In Natriello, G., McDill, E. L., & Pallas, A. M. (1990). *Schooling disadvantaged children: Racing against catastrophe* (p. 197). New York: Teachers College Press.

6. Schools and alternative programs should be better coordinated.

Students noted they often had a hard time making the transition from an alternative program back to school. Personnel working in alternative programs had similar concerns about schools' lack of cooperation with their efforts to provide students with a meaningful education until they could return to school.

DISTRICT, STATE, AND NATIONAL POLICIES

School districts, states, and the nation as a whole influence whether Hispanics drop out or stay in school. School districts' influence is felt through their governance of schools, recruitment of a workforce, and the professional development that they provide to teachers. States exert influence through their education policies, assessment and accountability programs, and teacher certification requirements. The nature and quality of national debates involving education influence funding and other forms of legislation.

"If we're the future, I don't see why we [funding for schools] have to be cut. It's the future of the whole country." Speaker at student leader meeting, New York City

The project heard some individuals link Hispanic education to debates about immigration—both legal and illegal—and to language policy. As a result, debates about what to do to solve a problem turn into debates about deeply held beliefs involving noneducational matters. Such unrelated beliefs interfere with the development of a coherent education policy at all levels. The following is a sampling of beliefs that are obstacles to solving the problem of Hispanic dropout: (a) until we really understand the full extent of the problem, we can do nothing; (b) this is a local school problem that does not lie in the domain of state or other policy levels; (c) there are a few successful programs, but they cannot be scaled up; (d) these are not our children, hence, it is not our problem; (e) the problem is short term and will go away when something else (typically, immigration policy) is taken care of; and (f) serious efforts to solve this problem cost more than the public is willing to spend.

Once again, our findings contradict such wrongheaded beliefs. For instance, at the most impressive sites that the project visited, language policy and immigration issues had been depoliticized for the cause of education. Districts decided that, in order to educate their students, they had to recruit teachers who could communicate with them and with their parents, that is, with the district's ever-changing clientele. These districts hired teachers and administrative staff who spoke Spanish and who were familiar with Hispanic culture. Their schools developed programs that built on students' native language and their real-world knowledge in the various subjects in order to prepare them for life in America—for higher education, jobs, careers, and citizenship. There were no questions about using and, in many cases, developing children's native languages and home cultures because this was what the children brought to school with them. Also, there were no questions that children would become literate in English and learn to high standards.

"Chapter 1 and dropout prevention programs are the traditional means for providing extra assistance to the most needy students. However, they are often de facto lower tracks for students who have been retained." In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (p. 206). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Schools and programs were very creative in finding new sources of funds and in redeploying existing monies for dropout prevention and education improvement efforts. Although the project was impressed by the sheer amount of volunteerism and creative funding employed by every site and program that its members visited, every single program and alternative school was severely underfunded and living a hand-to-mouth existence. Programs had waiting lists. Alternative schools—with their relatively small student-to-teacher ratios—felt that they were always on the chopping block due to their costs and their districts' ongoing budget problems.

On the other hand, the conditions that we witnessed at many sites recalled for us what many of those we interviewed told us—that dropping out under such conditions is a healthy response. Children and their families should never be subjected to such unhealthy conditions that they would feel they had no other choice but to drop out in order to protect their well being. Classrooms and schools where instruction and proper attention to children's needs are inhibited due to overcrowding, lack of equipment and supplies, rundown buildings, and overused, out-of-date textbooks are all unhealthy conditions that no country with high expectations for learning for all children should expect any of its children to tolerate.

Likewise, given the few resources that are available for professional development to upgrade teachers' skills for working with changing populations of students, it is not too hard to see why some school personnel respond to their Hispanic students with neglect if not actively push them out.

"When a student fails a class or two, some people want that student to drop out. He's taking space that someone else who wants to succeed could have." Speaker at student leader meeting, New York City

The project heard from parents, teachers, and other school personnel about contradictory guidelines and policies that are too complex for parents to understand and too time-consuming for them to follow. For instance, one district often informs parents about their children's educational problems and possible program options by using a multi-page check-off form that includes special education, Title 1, bilingual education, English as a second language, socio-psychological and behavioral problems and counseling, achievement, and excessive absence or tardiness. Though convenient for the district, these forms confuse parents who are too overwhelmed to ask for clarification about what the form means. Confronted with such forms, policies, and guidelines parents feel discouraged from participating in decisions that affect their children's schooling.

"Another surprise was the readiness of school administrators to administratively transfer students to another school for behaviors associated with school disengagement and dropout—high absenteeism, disruptive non-conforming behavior, or poor academic work. Case studies in other schools have documented how often and in what ways school administrators actively 'got rid of troublemakers.' . . . Special education law and due process were frequently ignored by either blatant noncompliance or by conforming to the letter of the law but not the intent or spirit of the law. . . . There was deep resistance by the school to provide more than 45 minutes of resource help despite youth's failing multiple classes. Most often it

was 'regular' education personnel who were responsible for making suspension and disciplinary referrals about special education youth. In general, these personnel were more exclusionary and alienating in their approach than inclusionary and engaging. Frequently, the 'letter of the special education law' framed actions as opposed to the 'spirit' of the IEP process. . . . Frequently, when a youth was having difficulty in school, especially in terms of behavior problems, the school would place the students on home or independent study. . . . Unfortunately, we found that almost every single youth placed on independent study, where they came to a center to receive and turn in assignments completed at home, did not produce enough school work to earn any credits toward graduation." In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). *ALAS, Achievement for Latinos through academic success* (Dropout prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), pp. A66-A66.

District and state policies can provide incentives for schools to ignore student difficulties—if not to actively push students out. For instance, many states provide funding based on a one-time student count that takes place early in the year. Parents and school personnel reported that prior to the student census, schools actively try to keep students. After the schools have their monies, they can simply ignore student tardiness, absence, truancy, and other behaviors that lead to dropout. Not only are there no sanctions when schools rid themselves of such "bad" students, there are positive consequences, especially for overcrowded schools. When students leave overcrowded schools, the benefits include smaller classes, additional resources for the "good" students who remain, improved performance on mandated assessments and on other indicators of school productivity, less stress on the overall climate of the school, and a reduced administrative burden. Moreover, safe in the knowledge that a new crop of students will enter in time for next year's census, the school has no reason to recruit students who leave into already overcrowded alternative programs.

Districts and states also provide incentives for schools to exclude Hispanics from their accountability systems by focusing solely or mostly on achievement as the major accountability item and then allowing schools to exclude students who are identified as limited English proficient, in need of special education services, or through some other categorical marker. The exclusion of such students and the sole focus on test data allow, if not encourage, schools to hide many of their lowest-achieving students.

"The city, state, and others allow bad conditions to continue. They set the codes and allowable noise levels in schools. The district gets waivers from the state so that untrained teacher aides can become teachers." Testimony at HDP open forum, San Antonio

Districts may overenroll high school students, under the presumption that not all students will come to class. Such a practice sends strong messages to students that they are not expected to attend. Teachers also receive the message that some students are not expected to come to class

and that they are not expected to teach all of their enrolled students. It should not be surprising when students and teachers comply with these messages.

Recommendation 1: Districts should establish strong permanent alternatives as part of a comprehensive strategy of dropout prevention. Alternative schools should be high-status organizations receiving resources commensurate with the tasks they undertake and the success they demonstrate.

Recommendation 2: Districts, in cooperation with state departments of education, should establish special alternative schools for at-risk students with a clear mission that includes experimentation, curricular innovation and staff development.

Recommendation 3: State policy should require each school system to establish a Management Information System that provides basic and common data on all students.

Recommendation 4: State policy should require schools to examine the effects of course failure, grade retention, out-of-school suspension and other practices that appear to impact negatively on at-risk students.

Recommendation 5: State and local policy should encourage the decentralization of large schools and school systems, creating smaller units characterized by site-based management.

Recommendation 6: State and local policy should encourage the development of new curricula and teaching strategies designed for diverse groups of at-risk students.

Recommendation 7: State and local policy should develop mechanisms to hold schools accountable for their dropout rates through a system emphasizing outcomes and results.

Recommendation 8: Cities should develop broad-based community partnerships aimed at serving at-risk youth.

In Wehlage, G. G., Rutter, R. A., Smith, G. A., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R. R. (1989). *Reducing the risk: Schools as communities of support* (pp. 225-236). London: The Falmer Press.

1. ***Districts should inform students and parents of their policies in ways that are clear and easy to understand. Policies should not be overly complex, nor should administrative procedures discourage parental participation. Parents should be warned, well in advance, when their children's behaviors are deemed unacceptable to the district. Districts should enforce their policies fairly and equitably. If a student is charged with a serious infraction, districts should not bypass due process by also charging the student with something that is unrelated but easier to substantiate.***

2. ***States should analyze their policies to remove incentives for schools to ignore, if not push out, students who experience trouble. State policies should be rewritten with an eye towards encouraging schools to do all they can to retain students. District and state accountability and incentive systems should encourage schools to keep students through high school graduation.***

Report cards of school effectiveness and other efforts by districts and states to hold their schools publicly accountable should not be limited to overall levels of achievement. They should include information about students who were excluded from the tests, student completion rates, attendance statistics, and student enrollment in various tracks. Schools and Hispanic parents should know how Hispanic students are doing.

"We recommend four strategies for moving decisions to levels where information on student performance and behavior is available: (1) revising rules and programs to promote flexibility; (2) using goal setting to enhance the discretion of local educators; (3) creating self-contained teaching/learning units, to allow educators to make decisions about deploying resources to meet student needs; and (4) providing educational resources above those thought minimally necessary, thus allowing educators some discretion in addressing emerging needs."
In Natriello, G., McDill, E. L., & Pallas, A. M. (1990). *Schooling disadvantaged children: Racing against catastrophe* (p. 161). New York: Teachers College Press.

3. ***In light of the ongoing standards movement, districts and states should develop standards for school conditions, class and school size, and in general, student opportunity to learn. Districts should restructure schools that are too large and impersonal into smaller-sized units. Districts' and states' oversight and accountability mechanisms should ensure that Hispanic students participate in the ongoing reform agendas. Reform agendas—especially high-stakes testing programs—should be explained to the parents of Hispanic students, and their input solicited. High-stakes testing programs should be monitored to ensure that they are implemented equitably so that Hispanic students have a fair opportunity to show what they know and can do.***

4. ***Districts and state education agencies should design comprehensive strategies for dropout prevention that are tied to the states' standards and that take account of students' differing needs at different points in their lives.***

Well-meaning advocates for one or another intervention targeted for a specific age-group often seem to promise more than they can accomplish. No single strategy—be it early childhood intervention, Title I, bilingual education, alternative education, curriculum reform, student tutoring and mentoring—can by itself solve the problem of student dropout. The most successful schools visited by the Hispanic Dropout Project used multiple approaches across pre-K–12, and even provided support for older people to return to school to obtain a high school certificate.

5. ***School districts and state education agencies should evaluate currently funded dropout prevention efforts against curricular and student learning standards, and they should provide support for those efforts to continuously improve.***

6. ***As schools become better able to respond to their diverse student populations, programs should be redirected so as to (a) reconnect students who have been placed on the borderline between success and failure and (b) provide alternatives for students who, for whatever reason, prefer to take alternative pathways to a high school credential.***

7. ***Districts and state education agencies should provide lifelong learning opportunities so that people past school age can still acquire a high school credential.***

Society cannot afford to give up on people who, for whatever reasons, have dropped out of school. They should be encouraged to and provided with multiple opportunities to return to school and to graduate.

"Prior policy has always been focused on prevention. What about people who have dropped out? What should we be doing about the people who are the victims of previous policy and inaction?" Testimony at HDP open hearing, New York City

8. ***Districts, state education agencies—indeed, all of society—need to target their resources strategically and to invest more money in helping schools, particularly urban schools, to provide their Hispanic students with opportunities to learn. For example, additional resources could be tied to (a) schools' implementation of programs that have been proven effective or (b) the expansion and continuous improvement of a promising program that is already in place.***

Because existing resources need to be directed more strategically, schools and districts should carefully evaluate their programs and engage in continuous improvement of their best practices. School districts should redirect monies strategically from programs that are not working (and that seem unable to work) to implementing and improving school-based programs that do work.

Schools—especially urban schools in conditions of poverty—need additional resources. There is no way to improve the physical plant of run-down schools, to reduce class size, to target much-needed resources, to purchase basic supplies and new books, to reform curriculum, and to provide professional development for teachers without an increased investment in those schools that educate our poorest children.

"The formal institution that directly affects virtually all adolescents is school. Schools are critically important because education is the means by which individuals from economically or socially disadvantaged backgrounds can build the skills and credentials needed for successful adult roles in mainstream American life. . . . Because of residential stratification, most of these adolescents attend schools with the fewest material resources. In 1991, for example, per pupil expenditures in the 47 largest urban school districts averaged $5,200; in suburban districts, the figure was $6,073. Although an $875 per pupil funding gap may not appear significant, in an average class of 25 students, the difference is almost $22,000—enough to hire an aide, provide special instructional materials or computers, pay significantly higher teacher salaries, or improve a dilapidated classroom. When the relatively greater need of urban chil-

dren for special services is taken into account (for health needs, language instruction for non-English-proficient students, etc.), the resource differences are even more critical. Differences in funding of this magnitude can make a clear qualitative difference in the total educational experience. Traditional education practices contribute to the high rates of failure for low-achieving students. Historically, schools have addressed the diversity of student achievement by tracking students into homogeneous ability groups and by retaining students who fail courses because of poor attendance, grades, or test scores. Contrary to expectations, these practices have consistently shown negative academic and social consequences for low-achieving adolescents."
In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (p. 7). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Districts and school personnel may balk, at first, at the idea of redirecting existing resources. The larger society might have concerns about investing more money than is currently the case in the education of poor Hispanic children. Yet, if monies could be invested strategically in order to provide Hispanics with high-quality education programs in the first place, then schools and society would save on the long-term costs of their failure to have educated these children properly.

9. ***Schools, districts, and state education agencies need to develop better management information systems that follow students more accurately and efficiently.***

In order to plan, monitor, evaluate, and improve dropout prevention programs, people need information about students who leave school. Such information is simply not available. Current policy is focused on students who stay; hence there are few incentives for schools or districts to worry about dropouts. Without such basic information, it seems impossible to envision the development of any comprehensive set of interventions.

Knowing annual dropout rates of high school students is a start, but ultimately inadequate for planning and monitoring programs. Where possible, districts should follow groups of students from first through twelfth grades.

10. ***Schools and districts must diversify their teaching workforce to include people with the knowledge, language skills, and backgrounds that will enable them to better connect with Hispanic students and their parents.***

Beyond having role models, Hispanic students need to encounter teachers who communicate trust and confidence, who can understand what students are experiencing, and who can guide and support students. Hispanic students reported establishing mutually respectful relationships with Hispanic teachers, with non-Hispanic teachers and volunteers who themselves had dropped out of school but still managed to further their education, with retired teachers who communicated a sincere confidence in students' intelligence and ability to succeed, and with other adults whose own life experiences validated them in the students' eyes. Such teachers were in short supply in these children's schools.

"In contrast to Coleman et al.'s 1966 finding of no consistent differences in the quantity and quality of school inputs for predominantly majority and minority schools, the analyses presented in this paper reveal substantial within district variations in four types of school inputs: teacher test scores, years of education, teacher experience and class size (student-teacher ratios). The statistical models presented in this paper document a sorting of school inputs based on campus racial/ethnic and socio-economic composition. In particular, the models suggest that teacher ability, measured with both verbal and written proficiency scores, decreases with campus percentage black and Hispanic and increases with the campus percentage of higher income students. . . . Texas teachers employed in schools with high fractions of disadvantaged minority students have fewer years of education and less experience and have more students in their classes." In Kain, J. F., & Singleton, K. (1996). *Equality of educational opportunity revisited.* (Paper presented at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Symposium.) Cambridge: Harvard Institute of Economic Research.

In addition, schools need teachers who can understand and talk to Hispanic parents. Parents respond best to people they know outside of school such as their neighbors and other parents, to people who treat them with respect, to people who speak Spanish or at least do not denigrate their accents, and to people who clearly show that they care for their children's academic success.

Diversifying the teaching workforce will occur only when people with broad experience, knowledge, and dispositions to work with Hispanic students are recruited into and successfully complete certification programs. Schools of education, school districts, state education agencies, state boards of education, and postsecondary education's governing bodies have important roles in diversifying the teacher workforce.

11. Schools and Colleges of Education should recruit people into the teaching profession who will diversify its ranks. They should develop course work, practica, student teaching, and other experiences that will help all preservice teachers to succeed with Hispanic students. The governing bodies of postsecondary education institutions should require that their faculty be able and willing to prepare teachers to teach Hispanic students.

Recommendation 1: Put the services in rather than pull students out.

Recommendation 2: Deliver the services without calling attention to the fact that special services are being provided.

Recommendation 3: Deliver the services within a supportive climate that includes adults as student advocates.

Recommendation 4: Provide students with substantive incentives to participate.

Recommendation 5: Carefully select, train, and support the staff persons providing the services.

In Rossi, R. J. (1995). *Evaluation of projects funded by the school dropout demonstration assistance program: Final evaluation report* (pp. 8-10) (Volume 1: Findings and recommendations). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

12. Teacher certification bodies should insist that entering teachers have the knowledge and skills needed to work with a diverse student body.

Because it is within the power of state boards of education to set minimal requirements for entering teachers, they should use those requirements to pressure universities to update their teacher preparation programs so that new teachers will be better able to, in the long run, teach Hispanic students. In addition, the certification bodies should update their rules and regulations so as to encourage the creation of a diverse teacher workforce.

13. Bilingual education, the education of Hispanics, and the education of immigrants should be depoliticized.

Many schools that were successfully keeping Hispanic students in school relied on bilingual education and incorporated Hispanic culture into their functioning. On the other hand, schools can also use programs for limited English proficient students to deny such students access to a mainstream education. In other words, bilingual education, English as a second language, and sheltered English instruction are but the means to an end—keeping students in school in one case, denying them educational opportunity in the other. Schools and districts should choose among program models and adopt those characteristics that best suit their unique situations.

"There is a need for broader recognition that the achievement of educational and social potential is not just an individual affair. It also involves the constraints of the peer groups in which the youths are embedded, and the constraints of the schools they attend. When schools segregate or cluster individuals who share low standards of accomplishment (or expectations for school dropout), they explicitly help bring about those outcomes. To keep educational opportunities open, there should not only be challenges for achievement, but ample assistance and support to ensure that each student will reach adequate standards.

The curriculum should include information that is not only preparatory for subsequent accomplishments; it should place the information in the context of living.

In plans to prevent serious problems of behavior, at-risk youths should be kept in the conventional system, not excluded from it. Exclusion serves to exacerbate problem behavior by the selective isolation of the individuals from the rules and standards of conventional society.

In the inner city and elsewhere, schools and the values they represent constitute safe havens for many students. In cases of children of privilege, the school is more typically an extension of the rest of the individual's life experience. For seriously disadvantaged youths, the haven might serve a unique function. This function must not be compromised, and society must ensure that access to schools remains open and safe, including zones around schools and places within it." In Cairns, R. B., & Cairns, B. D. (1994). *Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time* (pp. 191- 193). New York: Cambridge University Press.

COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS, BUSINESS, AND THE LARGER COMMUNITY

Community-based organizations, the business community, chambers of commerce, and other agencies can play mutually reinforcing roles in reducing the Hispanic dropout rate. Businesses and chambers of commerce—which are rightly concerned about the productivity and quality of the local workforce—should provide work experiences that support students' staying in school, provide incentives for students to continue their education, and encourage their employees' participation in all facets of the community's schools. Community-based organizations—which are concerned about the overall quality of life for Hispanics in the local community—should advocate for their members' concerns in the schools and seek support from business for the education programs that they provide to students.

"We [schools] can't do it alone. We have a hard time educating the kids who are staying in school." Speaker at HDP open hearing, San Diego

The thoughtful comments that we heard at the project's hearings and the activities that we witnessed provide ample counterevidence to those who would assert that groups outside the school have little or no role to play in addressing issues of Hispanic dropout. Latina businesswomen became active friends, role models, and mentors to younger Latinas. Chamber of Commerce members mentored and tutored students, volunteered in schools, and served on advisory boards and committees. Community-based organizations advocated on behalf of parents and provided education services that paralleled and supported Hispanic students' school experiences. Representatives from across the local community participated in local self-study efforts to improve the schools' responsiveness to their Hispanic clientele. We visited some alternative, out-of-school programs that were financially supported by local businesses. Some businesses and chambers of commerce provided scholarships for Hispanics to go on to college. These individuals and agencies maintained long-term, personal commitments to students.

"We should encourage businesses to help link parents with schools." Speaker at HDP open hearing, San Diego

However, we also heard of cases where the conditions of employment interfered with Hispanic parents' ability to participate in their children's education. Parents often noted that more of them would have come to the project's open hearings, but friends, family, and neighbors could not get off from work. Similar to earlier stories of parents who risked, and in some cases lost, their jobs to take an active role in their children's education, one parent testified about leaving his daughter at school every day at 8:30 a.m. If anything happened before he left work in the late afternoon, that parent could not go to the school without risking his job.

1. ***The local business community, chamber of commerce, and community-based organizations should work together to help to keep students in school. Coalitions of community-based organizations and businesses should monitor local conditions to ensure that Hispanic***

students receive the high-quality education that they deserve. These same coalitions should advocate at local, state, and national levels for the improvement of the educational conditions of Hispanic students.

In addition to in-school tutoring and out-of-school mentoring programs, financial assistance, and other forms of volunteerism, businesses should offer school-to-work apprenticeships and internships that integrate productive work and schooling for Hispanic students who wish to stay in school but feel pressure to contribute to their families. Businesses could also provide space and financial, managerial, and other forms of continuing assistance for school- and community-based alternative programs.

"Increase the credits that are offered to corporations for kids who are adopted and given the opportunity to work. Corporations should get involved. They should help with parent training and provide teacher training." Speaker at HDP open hearing, San Diego

2. ***Businesses where students work should provide incentives and support for their students to complete and to continue beyond high school.***

Many Hispanic students work out of basic economic necessity. Carefully designed school-to-work programs that balance between academic demands and the needs of the workplace can help students meet their economic and educational responsibilities by strengthening the connections between what students study and how it is applied in the workplace. Businesses must avoid encouraging or allowing students to work excessive hours that would endanger their school completion. Instead, employees of older secondary school students should provide flexible work schedules, tutoring, study time during work hours, mentoring, individual and family referrals to social service agencies as needed, incentives, and other supports so that students can finish high school. If a person cannot finish high school, then the business should encourage that student to obtain a GED.

Businesses where Hispanic students work should also develop scholarship and other financial assistance programs that encourage students to pursue postsecondary education.

3. ***The business community should implement policies that encourage parents to take time off, as needed, to go to parent–teacher conferences, to participate in school governance activities, and the like.***

Businesses should include paid leave for participating in school activities as part of their overall compensation package for workers.

"The majority of projects offered academic skills and counseling, and many offered a wide range of additional services, combined in a variety of ways within and across 'project components' (i.e., discrete programmatic activities for specific groups of students. Many projects were considered to offer comprehensive

services...academic, counseling, social support, and, for components serving grades 6 and higher, vocational/career)." In Rossi, R. J. (1995). *Evaluation of projects funded by the school dropout demonstration assistance program: Final evaluation report* (p. 2) (Volume 1: Findings and recommendations). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

4. ***The business community in conjunction with community-based organizations should support schools in their missions.***

Businesses and community-based organizations have expertise to share with schools on fund raising, needs assessment, strategic planning, and day-to-day management. They should study the physical plant and other resources of their local schools. As necessary, these organizations should press for increased financing of schools that is targeted to the identified needs and for ensuring that Hispanic students receive high-quality programs. They should also help schools to design and implement continuing improvement programs.

5. ***Community-based organizations should continue to include the concerns of Hispanic parents in their service and advocacy activities.***

We visited adult literacy programs, early childhood interventions staffed by parents, out-of-school tutoring offered by adults in the community, social service referrals, and mentoring efforts initiated by community-based organizations. In addition, many of these organizations encouraged parents to visit their children's schools and advocated for the school to take their parents' concerns seriously.

"We point out the need within communities to develop comprehensive, clear plans for delivering services to the disadvantaged. Most communities lack a coherent policy on what services are needed, who should be receiving them, and who is responsible for delivering them. An explicit policy with clearly stated goals, that takes into account the bureaucratic and administrative complexities characteristic of contemporary social service delivery, can help insure that individuals do not fall through the cracks in the social machinery." In Natriello, G., McDill, E. L., & Pallas, A. M. (1990). *Schooling disadvantaged children: Racing against catastrophe* (p. 196). New York: Teachers College Press.

6. ***Businesses should band together to support local research, development, and the dissemination of effective programs for enhancing student achievement and graduation rates.***

Businesses at sites visited by the Hispanic Dropout Project supported the development of dropout prevention programs. At a few sites, local businesses and the Chamber of Commerce also supported systematic research into those efforts. One national corporation supported the dissemination of a program that it had helped to develop.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

The Hispanic Dropout Project heard from representatives of many programs whose developers and staff showed an impressive commitment to improving the educational opportunities of Hispanics and to reducing the Hispanic dropout rate. Unfortunately, many of these programs found themselves in constant financial turmoil, in part due to their inability to provide convincing evidence that they were accomplishing their goals. The innovative ideas found in these programs are seldom tested; and hence, they face the skepticism of schools, the public, and funding agencies. Although we made the conscious decision to solicit the input of program developers and others involved in Hispanic dropout prevention in crafting these recommendations, we believe that they too should be subjected to rigorous empirical testing.

Student 1: "The differences between us and them [friends who have dropped out]? They haven't had the opportunities I've had—in life or in school. They're still young, still partying, acting like teenagers. I'm getting on with my life. They're struggling."

Student 2: "Well, it's okay to party. You just have to take responsibility for your own life." Testimony at HDP meeting with students, Albuquerque

1. There should be sustained evaluations of promising programs and dropout prevention practices.

Many programs and sites visited by the Hispanic Dropout Project did not have adequate research-quality evidence of their effectiveness. Given how these programs emphasize helping students, it is not surprising that scarce resources were not diverted into collecting and analyzing program-effectiveness data. On the other hand, it is difficult to recommend programs to others without empirical evidence that they make a difference. Moreover, such performance data are fundamental to continued program improvement. Program funders and designers should include evaluation components to identify effective programs that could be replicated elsewhere and to support ongoing improvement.

"Another community influence on dropout behavior is peers. Recent research reveals that peers exert a powerful influence on children, especially teenagers. Although the influence of peers on dropout behavior has not been the subject of much study, ethnographic studies report that dropouts of all ethnic backgrounds are more likely to associate with other youth who drop out or have low educational aspirations." In Rumberger, R. (1991). *Chicano dropouts: A review of research and policy issues.* In R. Valencia (Ed.), *Chicano school failure and success: Research and policy agendas for the 1990s* (p. 76). Philadelphia: Falmer Press.

2. There should be coordinated, sustained, and systematic programs of research that investigate the times and the mechanisms through which students of different backgrounds disengage from school.

Much research on student dropout is fragmentary, based on a single study, and seldom links purported causal agents with the evaluation of an intervention. For instance, we do not fully understand the complex relationship between pregnancy and a female's decision to leave school. Research can help schools to understand the mechanisms by which dropout occurs and to take steps to remove barriers to student engagement.

"The relationship between Latino children and the schools is a disconnect." Testimony at HDP open forum, New York City

3. ***Research and development should focus on identifying and developing Hispanic students' knowledge and interests, and on working with and strengthening the supportive social networks found in these students' extended families.***

Much of the at-risk and dropout literature is based on assumptions that Hispanic students and their families do not know very much, are missing some important competencies, lack certain traits, or have some fundamental flaw that needs fixing. The recommendations growing out of such research are predictably bereft of helpful ideas: Fix the flaws; if the flaws can't be fixed, despair.

On the other hand, the schools we visited and the more relevant and recent research literature try to identify what students know and what their families can do to support their education. Student knowledge (including knowledge of their cultures and bilingualism) and interests (including problems that are relevant to them) provide the basis for research and development in pedagogical practices (curriculum, teaching, and assessment), teachers' professional development, and school reform. Parental concerns about and caring for their children should be the basis for the research and development that seeks to build vibrant home–school partnerships.

"The most effective thing is contact *between students and the institution on a regular basis. Systematic, deliberate, ongoing contact with kids."* Testimony at HDP open forum, New York City

4. ***Dropout prevention programs that are proven to work should be sustained and disseminated. The education research and development infrastructure should include a component for transferring such programs from development to widespread implementation.***

Increasing America's Hispanic school completion rates cannot be a stop-and-go operation. In view of the urgency for proven dropout prevention programs, it is shocking to note that one of the most impressive programs found in the research literature no longer exists. This program was based on solid research, and had shown strong and sustained effects. Too many programs are developed to demonstrate a point and subsequently cease functioning when the developers or program funders move on to other tasks and priorities. The support for dropout prevention efforts that are shown to work should no longer come from demonstration monies but from the basic funding for the nation's schools.

"Three factors importantly affected the replication activities at various of the sites and may have inhibited the effectiveness of projects for students. These factors included: the fit of models to the replication sites; the extent of principal buy-in to the replications; turf considerations." In Rossi, R. J. (1995). *Evaluation of projects funded by the school dropout demonstration assistance program: Final evaluation report* (pp. 13-14) (Volume 1: Findings and recommendations). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

5. ***The population of Hispanic students who are limited English proficient should be taken into account in local, state, and national efforts to (a) improve and reform the education system, (b) evaluate the impact of schools and of categorical programs, and (c) implement accountability systems for schools.***

As noted above, the exclusion of Hispanics from such efforts contributes to their being invisible and, by extension, to schools not being held accountable for their educational success. One strategy for including Hispanic children that should be explored is the use of their native language for gathering information in those efforts.

"I knew of no alternatives. Either you go to school or you don't. Or you go for a GED, and that's not as good. I was never told of the alternatives." Former dropout at HDP open forum, New York City

6. ***Research is needed on preservice and in-service teachers' beliefs, knowledge, skills, and professional development as related to the education of Hispanic students. Moreover, research should include attention to issues surrounding the diversification of the teacher workforce.***

Teachers are central in reducing the Hispanic dropout rate. Teachers themselves, schools, and policymakers need to better understand the processes by which teachers can make a difference in their students' education.

7. ***Better data on student dropouts should be gathered at all levels: local, state, and national.***

Although available data clearly document the crisis of Hispanic dropout, one of the most common complaints we encountered involved the quality of data on student dropouts. The nation needs clear, commonly accepted, and stable definitions of dropout that allow for comparisons across states, that allow schools to decide if they should adopt a program that was effective elsewhere, and that provide policymakers and parents with a clear sense of how many students are dropping out of school and when they begin to drop out. Such information is fundamental to improving education at all levels. Hence, it should be systematically gathered, analyzed, and reported at local, state, and national levels.

"I want to give back to my family. As a Dominican woman, I am going to make it. Make my parents proud that their sacrifice was worth it. I'm going to go back to my community and show them, I made it." Speaker at HDP student leader forum, New York City

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

We, the members of the Hispanic Dropout Project, submit this *Final Report* to the United States Secretary of Education, with an urgency born of recognizing the devastating personal, social, and civic consequences that will accrue if Hispanic dropout rates do not improve.

> *"The income stratification that concentrates large numbers of low-income students into poorly funded schools is followed by instructional stratification, most often on the basis of prior performance. Low-achieving students are likely to be exposed to instructional practices—tracking and grade retention—that deny them educational opportunities, stigmatize them, and contribute to their sense of uncertainty and alienation. Many disadvantaged adolescents are unable to overcome these conditions. Students from low-income families are far more likely to receive bad grades or be held back, and as much as three times more likely to drop out before completing high school, than the children of more affluent families: 'consigning them to lives without the knowledge and skills they need to exist anywhere but on the margins of our society, and consigning the rest of us to forever bear the burden of their support.'"* In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (p. 103). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

The overall school completion rate has steadily increased, with some fluctuations, over the last 40 years: in the 1950s, an average of 40–50 percent of all students did not finish high school; in 1972, the overall dropout rate for people between 16 and 24 years of age was slightly less than 15 percent; in 1994, it was 11.5 percent. The gap in black–white school completion rate has been steadily closing over the past 20 years *through an increase in school completion by African Americans*: in 1972, about 21 percent of black, non-Hispanics between 16 and 24 years old had dropped out of school; in 1994, that rate was 12.6 percent—a drop of between 8 and 9 percentage points. In contrast, over the same time period, the average rate of white, non-Hispanic dropout decreased from approximately 12.5 percent to 10.5 percent—just 2 percentage points. In spite of this overall improvement in the school completion rate, the dropout rate for all Hispanics ages 16 to 24 in the United States has consistently hovered at between 30 percent and 35 percent. *There is no reason to expect that this unacceptably high rate of dropping out among Hispanic students will diminish on its own without major changes in our schools and society.*

The Census Bureau reports that there will be at least one million more elementary school students in our nation's schools by the end of the decade. Without adequate funding, classes will become even more overcrowded. Teachers hired to teach the baby boomers will be retiring in unprecedented numbers over the next decade. This provides an unprecedented opportunity to educate and recruit a *diverse* teaching workforce over the same time period.

We submit this report with impatience because we know that ours is not the first report to note this consistent disparity in school completion rates. Under previous Republican and Democratic

administrations, researchers, policymakers, and community advocates have spoken out about these disparities. Yet because little has been done to address them, the problems they identified have become a crisis that threatens this nation's well being.

"Programs for disadvantaged youth include those that aim to enhance the relevance of school to the students' future. If it is true that working- and lower-class adolescents believe that the social conformity and academic achievement demanded in school are not clearly linked to their future status in society, then efforts to establish this linkage in the minds of students should be successful in promoting academic achievement and educational attainment." In Natriello, G., McDill, E. L., & Pallas, A. M. (1990). *Schooling disadvantaged children: Racing against catastrophe* (p. 136). New York: Teachers College Press.

We submit this report with impatience because we know that, when the nation decides that something is a problem and sets its mind to do something about that problem, it moves—though often slowly—to solve the problem. The nation and its schools have risen to the challenges of dropout prevention for students in general, improving overall student achievement, starting to close the racial achievement gap, and starting to close the mathematics achievement gap between males and females. Critics from opposite ends of the political and educational spectra have often written as if there has been very little progress or even deterioration in our educational progress—as if the nation and its education systems were incapable of developing a consensus to do something about vexing social problems. The evidence clearly shows quite the contrary: *The nation and its schools can rise to the challenge when we set our collective will to do so.*

Improvement in overall school completion, student achievement, and the achievement gaps has taken decades. Progress in these areas could not be seen or measured in terms of election-year cycles or other yardsticks used by those seeking immediate payoffs or simple solutions. What is more, efforts to identify *the* cause for such trends—as if a simple, magic pill could be found—have been unsuccessful. We speculate that these improvements can be traced to a combination of factors. First, there has been a gradual change in the nation's beliefs so that high dropout rates, low achievement, and race- and gender-based achievement gaps have become unacceptable: Our expectations of minorities and women have risen. Second, the nation has developed a complex network of curricular and teaching innovations, school-based programs, community-based efforts, and other structural changes for educating students.

"No single model can encourage membership or respond to the specific educational needs and desires of all at-risk youth. . . . A multiplicity of interventions is required. Even then, however, some students may continue to resist the efforts of teachers whom they see as representatives of an opposing culture. . . . Many students are in fact willing to enter into the relationships with their teachers that foster social membership in the school. They become partners in the experience of 'us and us'. . . . Overcoming their sense of incongruity, formerly at-risk youth discover that their teachers can also be friends, and schooling can thus be a positive rather than an aversive experience." In Wehlage, G. G., Rutter, R. A., Smith, G. A., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R. R. (1989). *Reducing the risk: Schools as communities of*

support (pp. 203-204). London: The Falmer Press.

We submit this report with a sense of urgency and impatience precisely because of the slow pace of improvement. Hispanics confront too many excuses for the country's inaction regarding their educational status. Ways to improve the schools that Hispanics attend and solutions to Hispanic dropout are known; they should be implemented on a large scale. There are dozens of proven, replicable programs capable of increasing Hispanic students' achievement, increasing their high school completion, and increasing their college enrollment—we visited many of them. *Only a lack of political leadership, will, and resources keeps the nation from solving the problem; there is no shortage of effective models.*

The solutions that we propose in this report support one another. Our recommendations should be implemented together if the nation is to make a significant impact in reducing the Hispanic dropout rate. It would be most unfortunate if those who read our report were to selectively interpret our findings and recommendations as meaning that before they can do something, someone else must fulfill a specific task. We cannot stress enough: *Everything must work in synchronization.*

Youth are influenced by their family, school and community contexts. High-risk youth are most often required to function in contexts that are dysfunctional or antithetical to the nurturing and support children require. Consequently, if an intervention is expected to succeed it will have to address all three contexts in such a way as to enhance the effectiveness of the contexts and to increase the coordination and communication between contexts. . . . Effective middle school interventions must accomplish six functions.

(a) Frequent (in some cases hourly but generally daily or weekly) and on-going (sustained throughout the school year) monitoring of the youth's school performance.

(b) Close teamwork with parents including parent training in terms of being an effective educational consumer and issues with raising a teenager.

(c) A case manager is essential to coordinating services provided and linking school, home and community together into a cohesive structure for the youth.

(d) The intervention must respond to the individual needs of youth and must be sufficiently flexible to personalize the educational experience.

(e) A social cognitive problem-solving approach that teaches the youth and parents how to effectively handle short- and long-term challenges is highly effective in making high-risk youth less impulsive, more independent and more goal oriented.

(f) The intervention must actively attempt to change the youth's expectations and vision of the future from one of probable failure and hopelessness to one of hopefulness and possibility.

In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). *ALAS, Achievement for Latinos through academic success* (Dropout prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/ behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), pp. A67-A68.

Why, then, the persistent gap in Hispanic school completion? Many explanations have been offered: student characteristics such as social class, language, and achievement level—especially among recent immigrants; school-based forces such as student retention, ability grouping, and tracking; and nonschool forces such as family and/or neighborhood violence and criminal activity, lack of community-based economic opportunity, and the historical social and political oppression of different ethnic groups. Many of these "reasons" have assumed mythic proportions. They are used to explain a phenomenon that is portrayed as too large and too complex for schools to address. In short, these reasons have become little more than excuses for our schools' and society's failure to act.

The evidence that we have presented in this report clearly contradicts this counsel of despair. At our hearings around the nation, we heard Hispanic students, their parents, and community leaders tell us unequivocally that they care deeply about their schools. Through their words and actions, many school personnel, community representatives, and business people have shown that something can and must be done.

We propose an alternative reason for the persistent gap in Hispanic school completion: *Hispanic dropout rates have remained largely an invisible problem to all but Hispanic students, their parents, and their communities.* Although many researchers and a few policymakers have known about the problem, discussions of Hispanic dropout have often been submerged in discussions of dropouts in general, the education of ethnic minorities in general, or politicized debates about immigration, language, and bilingualism.

> *"You have to do it for yourself. In spite of all the obstacles, I had to overcome all of the people who said that I couldn't make it. Also, bring someone along with you. My sister, who dropped out, will come back to school. She sees I'm going to graduate. That encourages her."* Participant at HDP student leader forum, New York City

Attention to Hispanic school completion must become a salient part of the national agenda on education. To reverse the long-standing disparity in school completion between Hispanics and other groups will require the long-term, sustained attention that other issues have received. That this crisis has remained largely invisible results in inaction and allows the many excuses for doing nothing to go unchallenged. At a time of a dramatically increasing need for a well-educated citizenry, the nation cannot afford, nor can it tolerate, the persistently high rate of Hispanic dropout. We, as a people, need to say: *No more excuses, the time to act is now.*